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Review of *Charles M. Russell: The Life and Legend of America's Cowboy Artist* By John Taliaferro

Elizabeth Dear
C. M. Russell Museum

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Charles M. Russell: The Life and Legend of America's Cowboy Artist. By John Taliaferro. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996. Map, photographs, notes, index. xi + 318 pp. \$27.95.

For all the books written on Russell, an accurate, up-to-date biography has been lacking. Perhaps a definitive biography can never be fashioned since Russell left so little writing about himself. He and his wife Nancy did, however, leave many clues in letters to friends, in his fascinating tales, and in numerous other documents which, when pieced together, provide a credible portrayal of this complicated individual.

The first biography, published in 1948, twenty-two years after his death and eight after his wife's, was based on a manuscript commissioned by Nancy Russell which she deemed unsuitable for publication. Earlier autobiographies by some of Russell's cowboy cronies paint a distorted picture of his life during his early cowboy days. Later biographies, too, were based mainly on tales, inaccurate reminiscences, or simply fabrication and were often more fiction than fact. Rehashing information from the early biographies, they retold the same stories and legends responsible for many popular misconceptions about Russell and for the ultimate myth-building surrounding him. Even some of Russell's own accounts fed the myths and legends and begot inconsistencies.

A journalist and biographer by trade, John Taliaferro takes an "outsider's" look inside Russell's world, using substantial primary research materials, some of which previous writers on Russell have not seen before. Those of us who spend considerable time with Russell material are apt to find Taliaferro's account fresh and objective in its way of bringing new information and insights to readers. He places Russell's chronology—as well as specific paintings—in a historical context, elaborating on local and national events likely to have influenced how the artist saw his world. Ultimately, Taliaferro describes Russell as a complex, con-

tradictory person whose life was filled with irony and contrasts, not the least of which was his consummate love for the old West itself and his insistence on holding on to it as it was, even though change in the West was most profound and rapid during his lifetime.

Taliaferro attempts to dispel the profusion of legends and myths about Russell, which may rankle uncritical devotees. Many of his own theories, however, such as those regarding Charlie's supposed learning disability and the Russells' inability to have children, remain open to interpretation.

The volume's footnotes and sources contribute to its richness, though errors now and then creep in. The Weatherwax store ledgers from Utica, Montana (in the C. M. Russell Museum collection), for instance, containing numerous notations regarding both Charles Russell and his brother Ed, Taliaferro assigns to 1882 when in fact they date from 1885 and 1886. Occasionally paintings are also listed in the wrong years.

Despite this well-written book's achievements, Taliaferro is candid in acknowledging its inevitable limitations: "Speculation," he tells us, "works as a bridge over gaps in knowledge, but as a foundation, it is unstable. The goal of this chronicle has been to establish—in some cases, reestablish—the facts of Charlie Russell's life and to set them in useful context. But after all is said and done, no one will ever know the real Russell again. His true identity died with him, leaving only glimpses, moments, memories. Even Charlie, who considered himself a scrupulous documentarian, knew that re-creating the past completely and objectively was a shaky proposition."

ELIZABETH A. DEAR
C. M. Russell Museum
Great Falls, Montana